

The best laid plans

A 1990s tabloid headline might have read ‘Search for fire engine sparks a museum, but the story of plans for a Deddington Museum is a bit less incendiary.

Back in 1896 the Parish Council advertised its old steam-driven fire engine for sale.



North Oxfordshire Times, 1896

Nearly a hundred years later in 1988 Bill Hunt, then Clerk to Deddington Charity Estates, tried to find out what had happened to the fire engine. He was told ‘no records relating to this period are in existence’, and that some records belonging to the Parish Council had been destroyed in a fire at the home of its Clerk, Revd Maurice Frost. (The PC’s records for that time are now [online](#).)

This led him to bemoan the lack of village facilities for storing any documents of historical value and, as the Charity Estates own the Town Hall, they formed the idea of turning the upper floor into a museum. The project took some time to gather pace but between 1991 and 1993 and through appeals in DN, Bill Hunt collected a wide range of documents and artefacts ranging from a carving from Franklins, our local firm with world fame, to a scythe and shire horse collar, to 18th and 19th-century accounts receipts from local printing firm Cheneys. A list of the major donations is included as an Appendix.

The DCE needed financial help from the Parish Council to realise their ambition. The PC donated £2,500 to buy glass-topped display cabinets, and exhibits began to be displayed. The scheme was really taking off and two local newspapers even printed [reports](#) on our new museum.

At that time the PC had a lease on the Town Hall but, apart from hosting their monthly meetings and the occasional exhibition, the space was little used and looked unloved. So a firm of local architects, Norman Machin, was engaged to produce [plans](#) and a [feasibility study](#) on how to improve this most loved and valued parish asset.

In May 1992 a public meeting was held to discuss how the Town Hall might be developed as a major asset to the community. A working party was set up under Bob Stevens (Parish Councillor and DCE Trustee), DCE and PC to take the idea forward (see also the [history of the TH](#)).

In the Feasibility Study, the Trustees discussed how to classify exhibits, engage the Craft Group to produce labels, organise security, and even commission a weathervane for the Town Hall roof. But the PC had other ideas: they wanted the Town Hall to house not one, but two public toilets. They also decided that ‘for the Council to proceed it is felt that the Council should own the freehold of the building, particularly as the feasibility study showed

an estimated expenditure of up to £135,000 as compared to the sum allocated of £26,000' (PC Minutes, January 1993). At that point the idea of a museum was side-lined as the discussion widened into one of whether the PC should buy the listed building from the Charity Estates.

Nothing more, until a rather forlorn letter from Bill Hunt appeared in DN in March 1993:

The Council approached the Charity to consider a scheme to provide the village with public toilets. Our Feasibility Study produced a plan incorporating a public toilet in the Town Hall However our Councillors want something quite different.

I am inclined to the view that the Parish Council's only interest in the Town Hall is because it would provide the only likelihood of establishing a public toilet in the village. They have little or no interest in providing a museum and other facilities in the building. If I am right – and should my fellow Trustees be disposed to selling the Town Hall to the Parish Council – an aspect which causes me considerable concern is what would occur to the numerous items already donated to the museum.

And even more despairing in March 1995:

Now that we are told the Windmill Centre is 'up and running' those of us involved with the Museum project are hopeful that Parish Councillors will be able to devote their energies to other activities – such as the establishment of Deddington Museum.

The PC continued to discuss the possibility of buying the Town Hall and adding public toilets, until 1996, but there was no further mention of a museum. In the end it didn't happen, and relations between the Council and the Charity Estates deteriorated.

So what happened to the artefacts and documents? For many years they lay in the Clerk's garage gathering dust and mould until a later trustee, Charles Newey, made a valiant effort to return them to their donors. We ourselves retrieved a bundle of mounted photographs assembled for an exhibition in 1973, damp but recoverable.

Since then, the Charity Estates have repurposed the upper floor of the Town Hall. In 2016, at the suggestion of Chris Day (then Chairman of the History Society), a small group of volunteers (Rob Forsyth, Richard Broadbent and Gareth Richards) established a village archive housed in two filing cupboards in the Library. In 2020, due to more pressing use of the space, the cupboards were moved to the Windmill Centre and in 2022, thanks to two grants from the William Delafield Trust and Cherwell District Council, the cupboards have been replaced by a splendid warm, dry, purpose-built room at the Windmill complete with a dehumidifier in the storeroom. And where loos come free ...

Because of pressure on space we store documents only – no 1920s football boots! We have a team of scanners (thank you Anne Barlow, Martin Ince, Janet Macey, David Murray-Hundley and Gemma Webber), energetically scanning the images still coming our way. The images are uploaded into an online register and photographs are added to the Deddington Online Gallery (currently nearly 3,500 items). We would love to continue this task of preserving our parish history, so if you have anything you feel would be of interest, please contact one of us: Rob Forsyth, Mary Robinson or Richard Broadbent.

And what happened to the fire engine? We understood from old records that it went to Oxfordshire Museum Services but, as of June 2023, we've failed to locate it.



Late 19th c.



1926

Appendix: Items recorded in *Deddington News* articles by Bill Hunt (May 1991–March 1993)

DCE Trustees at the time: Ron Canning, Eddie Lines, Revd Ken Reeves, Bob Stevens, Bill Hunt (Sec.). Other input from Norman Stone, writer and editor of *DN*, 1987–94

Photo of Parish Councillors at time of May 1990 election
Byelaws to Castle Grounds

Poster of Clifton celebrations of 1953 Coronation
Franklins: two very large pieces of carving
(Asking for a Fardon clock)
Scythe and shire horse collar
Harness maker's name tag: GARDNER, MAKER, DEDDINGTON
Products from local jewellery company Solar Designs
Butcher's hooks
Collage of Ken Langstaff's 1991 DN cover on 15th anniversary of DN
Copy of lease written in Latin and Mediaeval English, believed to be an early mention of Thomas Pope
Regency, New Street, deeds 1761–1827
Aerial pic of Deddington 100 years previously. First thought taken from a hot air balloon, then recognised as a Wilkins bird's eye view *(Norman Stone note on Wilkins maps: 2 originals of Clifton from slightly different angles in village. View of Deddington from south is in Banbury Museum, seeking view from east)*
Halls Garage receipt, c. 1938
Parish Magazines 1888–89
'Notables' in fancy dress, occasion and date unknown
Bell pulleys from old church bells (3 lots from different donors)
Percy Walker's 1920s football boots
Tablet marking burial place of a dog serving with BEF in WW1: Airedale Jack, Dog Corps, BEF, 1914–1919, died 1927. *(Asking RBL for permission to move it from the Holly Tree grounds; no further action)*
Cheney account receipt 1821
Deddington and Bloxham Brass Band concert programme 7.2.1846
Receipt 28.3.1896, No. 5 Cottage, Garden and Hovel, Hempton
PCC items from crypt
Mounted enlarged photos, some copies of old, some from 1970s
Carved Franklin bookcase donated by one of Franklin's craftsmen
(Seeking old tokens which were issued by local businesses in the 17th c.)
Metal helmet from WWII Local Defence Volunteers
Wick cutter from pre-gas and electric lights
Buttons from Chisleatts shop c. 1915

March 1995: Bill Hunt now asking donors of items to hold on to them until the future of the museum is resolved

Sources: *Deddington News*, 1987–95, Parish Council Minutes, 1991–96

Mary Robinson
June 2023